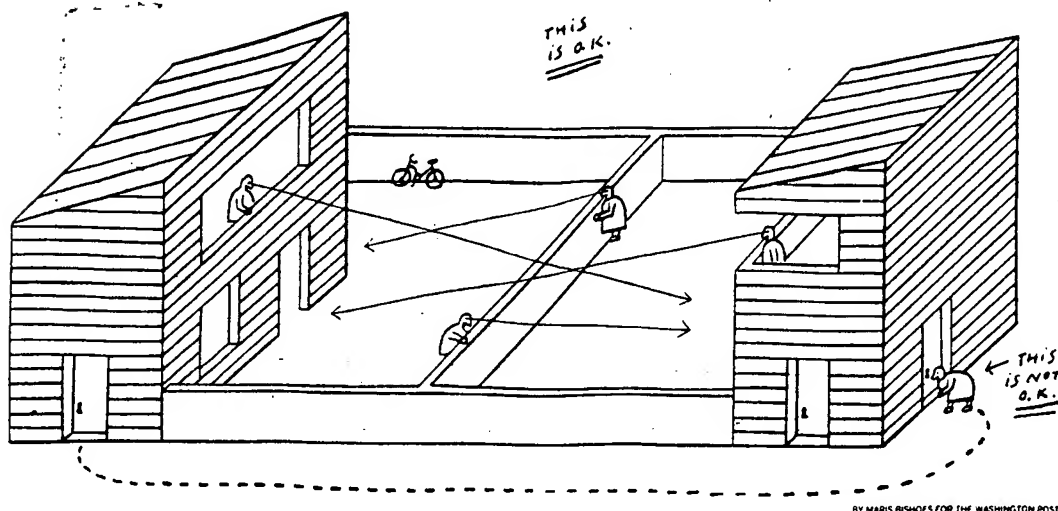


ARTICLE APPEARED
IN THE B.I.

WASHINGTON POST
8 December 1985



Israel Breaks the Rules

The Question in Jerusalem: Amateurish Bungling or the Way the System Works?

By Ze'ev Schiff

TEL AVIV — Israel has attempted over the years to maintain proper relations with American intelligence agencies, with both sides obeying certain formal — and informal — rules. But twice in the last six months, Israel has apparently stepped far over the line. The question now being asked by many in Israel is whether the two incidents are just accidents or is the entire system faulty?

The strange case of Jonathan Jay Pollard is not unique. Last May, the Israeli government admitted that it had been receiving nuclear krytons from the United States. Although Israel said the devices were used for nonnuclear purposes, krytons are sophisticated timing mechanisms that can be used to trigger nuclear bombs. The krytons allegedly were shipped to Israel without U.S. government permission. A State Department spokesman said at the time that the United States had "expressed its serious concern to the Israeli government about this alleged violation of U.S. law" and had been assured that Israel would cooperate with the U.S. investigation.

The Pollard affair came to light on Nov. 21 when Pollard was arrested outside the Israeli embassy in Washington by agents of the FBI. Pollard has been charged with espionage and is being held without bail pending action by a federal grand jury. He has entered no plea to the charge. Israel has promised to cooperate with the United States.

Israel's spies have broken the rules of the intelligence community before, but until this year most of those events were in the distant past, when Israeli intelligence-gathering was just beginning. The most famous fiasco

occurred in Egypt in 1954, when Israeli officials, trying to create tension between Egypt and the United States, sent Egyptian Jews to place bombs at American facilities in Egypt.

That affair ended with the execution by Egypt of two local Jews and the death of an Israeli agent. But the 1954 affair and other isolated incidents since then have been the exception, rather than the rule. One of the claims made in Israel after the Pollard affair was uncovered was that "Nothing terrible has happened. Everybody spies on everyone else." It is true that mutual covert information-gathering goes on even among friends; yet there is a kind of unwritten code of ethics among intelligence agencies of friendly nations. In the Pollard case, Israel clearly broke the rules of the game.

Obviously friendly nations gather intelligence about each other. That is expected and accepted. Telephone conversations and radio communications between embassies and their governments back home are monitored, which also means that codes are broken. Israeli officials know that their embassy in Washington is on the list of friendly diplomatic missions whose communications are being monitored. Among conversations reportedly intercepted were those of prime ministers talking to their ambassadors in Washington.

It is also common practice for military attaches to camp out at inter-urban junctions all over the world, trying to spot troop movements or to observe, and even to photograph, military installations from outside. One of the military attaches of a European country with an embassy in Israel boasted to me that he had identified all major units of the Israeli defense force that took part in the invasion of Lebanon.

Sometimes military attaches are obstructed to prevent their gathering information. Thus, in the early '60s, an Israeli military attaché in Washington was harassed by a camera positioned in front of his residence, following the publication in Israel of information, obtained by him, on one of the Arab countries.

A common way of information-gathering is, of course, through meetings with politicians, public figures and other personalities. All such meetings and similar activities are deemed permissible. Prior to the development of orbital satellites, there were instances of photo-reconnaissance flights over territory of friendly countries, such as an American intelligence mission to gather details of Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona, before Israel permitted the United States to inspect it. Such flights were irregular in that they involved penetration of another country's airspace and violation of its sovereignty.

Ironically, the Pollard case broke just as relations between both countries' intelligence communities are at their best, having improved in the wake of the Achille Lauro hijacking. Relations between Israel and the United States intelligence are based on an agreement signed back in 1968, which has since been extended, to mutual satisfaction, in various spheres. Close and fruitful contact exists above and beyond the formal agreement, with both sides profiting from that cooperation.

For its part, Israel supplies a wealth of military and intelligence data, including information about its armed forces, lessons gleaned from its wars, information on Arab armies, on captured Soviet weapons and Russian activities in the Middle East in general, as well as on Israeli weapons systems. Israel does not obtain all she would like to from the United States in the framework of this cooperation, but the final result is profitable for Israel in several important and vital areas.

Why is the Pollard case being considered a violation of the rules of the game among friendly nations? Because in that case Israel penetrated, for a relatively long period of time, the holiest of holies — the intelligence community of an ally. What is more, this penetration was done through a hired agent who received regular payments.

One would not expect Israel to drop the matter if the CIA had recruited and paid an Israeli intelligence officer and received stolen documents from him. The Israeli se-

curity services would have reacted the same way the FBI did. Those who rationalize Israel's actions in this affair justify what was done by claiming that Israel discovered, through Pollard, that secrets of the Israeli defense forces had been leaked to the Americans.

Finding a leak is important, but the motivation for recruiting Pollard obviously was not to find out about leaks of Israeli military secrets. If Israel did receive such information from Pollard, this intelligence was only a byproduct that came at a later stage in the alleged relationship.

Lekem, the special Israeli unit for scientific relations that allegedly was using Pollard, was established more than 20 years ago by Shimon Peres when he was in the defense ministry. It was Lekem that was responsible in 1968 for covertly obtaining from a Swiss engineer plans that allowed Israel to build its own version of the French Mirage fighter-bomber after France embargoed the further sale of the plane to Israel. Although the duties of Lekem are cloaked in secrecy, it is in no way responsible for preventing the leakage of Israeli military secrets, or for gathering information on Arab armies — the activities it was allegedly engaged in with Pollard.

So what happened here? Even when we separate the Pollard affair from all its political implications, and look at it only from the professional intelligence point-of-view, the conclusion is inescapable that this

was a completely amateurish operation, not at all up to the grade of Israeli intelligence, which is known for its high standards.

Obviously, if Pollard was used as an agent, he had not been sufficiently investigated by the Israelis first. For example, he reportedly claimed to Israeli officials that he was acting on behalf of American intelligence agencies. Background checks that are standard for any intelligence organization apparently were not conducted on Pollard. Investigators are still trying to determine exactly how Pollard and his Israeli contacts began their relationship. If someone did maintain covert contacts with him over a period of several months, that person did not follow basic rules of secret intelligence work.

It seems extremely strange that those contacts were made at the Israeli embassy in Washington. No less peculiar is the fact that diplomats and scientific attaches without suitable intelligence background apparently were responsible for the operation. Under those circumstances, it is no wonder that the contacts were discovered with comparative ease.

As the affair was finally uncovered, the Israeli diplomats were smuggled out of the United States like thieves in the night, without coordination with the ambassador and other officials. Taking such action without informing responsible higher officials in the government would be unthinkable in the case of the Israeli Mossad (the Israeli intelligence agency) or Shin Beth (counter-intelligence agency).

In addition, there are further professional questions regarding methods of control of intelligence networks in Israel. The body concerned is called the Unit for Scientific Rela-

tions. How could it happen that the unit deviated so blatantly from its area to intrude into spheres completely outside its responsibilities? And although the operation continued for quite some time, nobody brought it under control.

But above all, how can it be explained that an operation of such extreme irregularity — the penetration of the American intelligence community over a long period — was not reported at all to Prime Minister Shimon Peres or Defense Minister Itzhak Rabin? If they had been briefed on this irregular operation — as I am convinced after careful reporting that they certainly were not — it would have been nipped in the bud.

It is obvious that the Pollard affair reveals a serious fault in the control of sensitive intelligence-gathering by the political echelon in Israel. A large void has been discovered in the control network. The immediate conclusion in Israel was that the unit in question should be dissolved. This action is an unavoidable consequence of what has occurred. But it must also be noted on this occasion that, in the past, the unit was considered by the Israeli government most successful and it has contributed much to Israel's security.

Even with its successes, the unit did not operate as it did in the Pollard affair. From the professional point of view, the action taken is obviously not sufficient. It is not enough to decree that, from now on, no irregular intelligence operations must be mounted against a friendly country such as the United States. Israel must reexamine the method of reporting and the control of its intelligence community to the political echelon in order to make very sure that an affair like this cannot recur.

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